

VZCZCXRO3946

OO RUEH DU RUEH GI RUEH JO RUEH MA RUEH MR RUEH PA RUEH RN RUEH TR  
DE RUEH BZ #0362/01 3571128  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
O R 231128Z DEC 09  
FM AMEMBASSY BRAZZAVILLE  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1653  
INFO RUEH ZO/AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE  
RUEH RO/AMEMBASSY ROME 0064  
RUEH FR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0519  
RUEH BS/AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS 0067  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0085  
RUEH BZ/AMEMBASSY BRAZZAVILLE 2072

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 05 BRAZZAVILLE 000362

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [UNHCR](#) [WFP](#) [CT](#) [CM](#) [CG](#) [CF](#)

SUBJECT: REFUGEE UPDATE - 88,000 DRC REFUGEES IN THE LIKOUALA REGION  
OF CONGO-B

REF: A. BRAZZAVILLE 345  
[1](#)B. BRAZZAVILLE 337  
[1](#)C. BRAZZAVILLE 329  
[1](#)D. BRAZZAVILLE 318  
[1](#)E. KINSHASA 1084

BRAZZAVILL 00000362 001.2 OF 005

Summary

-----

[1](#)1. (U) Over the last two months, 87,789 DRC refugees have crossed the Ubangui River into the Likouala region of the Congo in order to flee fighting in the Equateur province of DRC. DCM and RefCoord visited five of the approximately 60 refugee sites between December 17 and 19. The refugees are spread out over 300 kilometers along the banks of the Ubangui and are mostly sheltered in make-shift huts in villages close to the edge of the river, though there are several thousand squatting in horrible conditions in an abandoned factory and a school in Betou town. Although the majority of the refugees have until now managed to survive on food brought from the DRC before and after the fighting (canoes continue to cross back and forth in search of food) their coping mechanisms will likely break down over time. Most of the food in this region comes from the DRC, where fields have been abandoned due to the fighting.

[1](#)2. (U) UNHCR and WFP have responded well, providing non-food items (NFIs) and food from existing stock in the region, but these resources are now tapped out. Fortunately, UNHCR did not close its offices from previous rounds of refugees, and had local partners in place. The logistics of getting additional food and NFIs to the region are daunting - NFIs will have to be flown in, and food will have to come overland from Cameroon via the Central African Republic. Overhead costs will therefore be substantial. MSF-France and a local NGO supported by UNHCR are providing much-needed health assistance with both fixed and mobile medical clinics. American missionary doctors based in Impfondo treated the wounds and operated on at least a dozen seriously injured refugees. UNICEF donated water bladders to several sites, which have been made functional with assistance from MSF. Though it has not yet granted refugee status, the GROC has been cooperative and the ROC military has provided significant security to both refugee communities and UN relief operations. Although the GDRC military has retaken control of much of the region in the course of the last week, the refugees we met told us they would not return to the DRC anytime soon,

because their security cannot be assured. Some were attacked brutally by their own neighbors from other tribes. It is difficult to imagine that the refugees will return within the next few months; six months, a year, or longer is possible depending on the stability of the Equateur province of the DRC.

#### Likouala Refugee Situation Overview

-----

¶3. (U) Embassy Brazzaville Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) and Kampala-based Regional Refugee Coordinator (RefCoord) undertook an assessment mission to ROC's Likouala Department which has received an influx of 87,789 refugees from DRC across the Ubangui River over the past 2 months. During December 17-19, DCM and RefCoord traveled with UNHCR to five refugee sites: Impfondo town at the southern end of the refugee influx zone; Falco and Mondzombo in Betou town at the northern end of the refugee influx zone; Mankolo village 30 kilometers north of Impfondo; and Eboko, one of the largest refugee sites with 9,697 refugees, located about 50km south of Betou and almost directly across the river from the DRC town of Dongo, which saw the first and largest attacks on minority ethnic groups that led to the refugee outflow.

¶4. (U) GROC local officials indicated that the number of refugees outstrips the local population in the district by about 20,000 people. The refugees are dispersed among more than 60 sites along 300km of the Ubangui River, with the largest concentration of the population in the Betou District (approx. 57,000) at the northern end of this axis. (NOTE: A significant

BRAZZAVILL 00000362 002.2 OF 005

portion of the local population is former DRC refugees from a prior refugee influx who have been locally integrated in ROC and many of the current refugees and second-time refugees who were repatriated to DRC during the past several years. END NOTE.) Brazzaville-based Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and World Food Program (WFP) representatives estimate that the total refugee population will peak at between 130,000 and 150,000 (including the between 9,000-18,000 refugees currently in CAR who they anticipate will travel to ROC soon in order to be in closer proximity to their villages and families) and that the refugee situation will last a minimum of one year.

¶5. (U) UNHCR reported that refugees crossed the river in three waves: the first being those who directly experienced conflict (Oct. 29), the second being those who fled because of rumors of fighting (Nov. 28), and the third being those who fled upon the arrival of FARDC troops in the affected areas of Equateur Province (within last 1-2 weeks). Those who fled direct conflict arrived with little-to-none of their household goods or food stocks and have minimal coping strategies. Many of the refugees in the second and third waves were able to bring their household goods, including roofing materials and generators in some cases, as well as a supply of food for their immediate needs. Refugees from all groups appear to have found some access to day labor opportunities (in areas such as fishing) among the local population in which they receive food for work.

¶6. (U) Although it has referred to them as refugees, GROC has not granted refugee status to this group. It has, however, at UNHCR's request allowed that organization to begin registering refugees. UNHCR plans to begin registration during the week of December 21. (NOTE: UNHCR had already sent a Protection Officer

to the area to begin identifying and registering unaccompanied minors (UAMs) and to begin family tracing. END NOTE.) The Sous-Prefet of Betou District has also agreed to allow UNHCR to use a parcel of land behind the Mondzombo School in Betou town to consolidate the nearly 6,000 refugees currently sheltered in the school and the abandoned Falco match factory. Despite better access to services, the refugees at these two locations are living in difficult conditions on cement floors with little privacy.

17. (U) UNHCR and WFP said that logistics is their biggest challenge in meeting the needs of this population. There is no viable road between Impfondo and Betou; the river provides the only transport route. However, the region north of the equator is entering the dry season in which the wide, shallow Ubangui River ceases to be navigable by large boats. The small UNHCR speedboat which transported DCM and RefCoord between Impfondo and Betou scraped sandbars several times during the 4.5-hour journey. UNHCR and WFP have a number of transport barges, but those will soon be unable to make the journey due to the dropping water level. River transport of goods from Brazzaville to Impfondo is costly, slow, and has been subject to attack. A barge carrying WFP-provided food and a 15,000-liter fuel donation from GROC took 10 days to reach Impfondo and was attacked by rebels just south of the town, requiring assistance from the ROC military. UNHCR estimated that transporting 50,000 liters of fuel to Impfondo from Brazzaville requires between one-quarter and one-third of the fuel being transported to fuel the journey. The alternate transport route is via Bangui either by air or overland from Douala and then via road south to Betou. When the Bangui-Betou road is in good condition, the trip takes 5-6 hours. There is an airstrip at Betou but it needs to be repaired; WFP Country Representative Alex Loriston said that he is talking with GROC representatives about this issue.

18. (U) These logistical challenges raise the cost of the operation and make funding the parallel challenge for UNHCR and WFP. Using funds from its Operational Reserve, UNHCR has ordered non-food items (NFIs) for approximately 35,000 people. (NOTE: This request was based on the refugee population at the time of the request a month ago; it has since more than doubled.) These NFIs supplement the NFIs for approximately 12,000 people that UNHCR had in country and has already distributed to the most vulnerable individuals among the refugee population. The EU's Kinshasa-based representative confirmed

BRAZZAVILL 00000362 003.2 OF 005

that the EU will provide a contribution of two million Euros, approximately two-thirds to WFP and one-third to UNHCR. UNHCR has already received a contribution of 300,000 Euro from the Italian government.

19. (U) When DCM and RefCoord asked refugees to identify their greatest needs they universally mentioned healthcare first and then education for their children second. Only one individual indicated that food was an issue; this individual had received food for 30 days during a distribution by WFP, but complained that it was not sufficient for his family. (NOTE: DCM and RefCoord met with an EU assessment delegation upon return from Betou to Impfondo and the Kinshasa-based EU representative on that team indicated that they had found food security to be a problem among the refugee population to the south of Impfondo. END NOTE.)

110. (U) Healthcare is provided by two organizations: Medecins d'Afriques (MDA) and Medecins Sans Frontieres - France (MSF-F). MDA is a local NGO that has worked with UNHCR during several years. MSF-F sent a team via Bangui that had been located in

DRC. The organizations have established health posts in Monzombo and Falco sites in Betou town. They are serving other sites along the river via a mobile clinic system using canoes/barges to ferry medical staff. MDA said that the two organizations cover each site so that it receives at least 1-2 visits per week and some sites receive visits 4-5 times/week with MDA and MSF alternating their visits. Refugees and healthcare workers told us that the healthcare profile of the refugee population was not out of the ordinary for a refugee situation with the most common illnesses being malaria, diarrheal diseases, and respiratory infections.

¶11. (U) UNHCR has worked with UNICEF (providing water bladders) and MSF (providing technicians and a water resting tank) to install a water system in the Eboko site that is capable of providing potable water at a rate of 50-60 liters/person/day. They have also identified Landza (2,182), Boyele (4,820), and Mondzombo (3,500) for installation of additional water bladders. Because access to water is not the main issue but rather cleaning the water that is available, UNHCR has focused on distributing water treatment tablets and on sensitizing the refugee population (via site-based refugee leaders/committees) on safe water use.

¶12. (U) Refugees have found a variety of shelter options. A number of refugees have taken over wattle-and-daub houses left when refugees repatriated during the past several years and have begun rehabilitating/expanding them. Other refugees brought their roofing materials with them and have constructed shelters with metal roofs. A third group has used UNHCR-provided blankets hung over wooden frames to create a shelter. In Betou town, 2,500 refugees have found space in Falco, an abandoned match factory, while 3,500 are in the classrooms of Mondzombo, a recently-finished school constructed by UNHCR. Neither of the Betou town locations is sufficient for the populations they house, although per prior note the local Sous-Prefet has provided land behind Mondzombo for construction of a camp for this population.

¶13. (U) A final, difficult aspect of this refugee situation is that the local population has lost its market from the other side of the river. Most goods bought by the population on the ROC side came from DRC and the towns/villages on the DRC side also formed the largest market for ROC crops/goods. When DCM and RefCoord traveled from Impfondo to Betou, there were little-to-no signs of life on the DRC side of the river (apart from sighting of a few FARDC soldier on the beach at Dongo, DRC). However, we did see quite a number of canoes crossing the river - some appeared to be people who had gone back to collect some of their crops or household goods from the DRC.

#### Political-Military Dimensions

BRAZZAVILL 00000362 004.2 OF 005

-----

¶14. (SBU) During the visit, FARDC forces in the DRC were reported to have gained control of Imesse, having regained control of Dongo in the previous week. The refugees at Eboko sent a delegation to Dongo on December 18 to meet with the Governor of Equateur Province, who was flown to Dongo via MONUC helicopter. The delegation had not yet returned to Eboko with news of their meeting, but they anticipated that the Governor would ask them to return to Dongo, but said they would not return until they could be sure that the fighting between

militia and DRC forces was definitively over. The wounded refugees at Impfondo have told the American missionary doctors there of their fear of the militia leader and witch doctor, General Odjani, whom they ascribe with strong powers (an ability to levitate, hide underwater, evade bullets, and give magical powers through his sword to those of his followers). UNHCR officers also reported that Odjani is greatly feared in the region, and reportedly is descended from an Enyele tribal leader who led battles against the other ethnic groups in the region, including the Mundzala, during the 1940s. (Note: This information is hearsay and should be confirmed; we pass it along merely to provide a sense of what the DRC refugees in the Likouala are saying. End note.)

¶15. (SBU) The ROC military appears to have been extremely responsive to the refugee crisis and to security requests from UNHCR and WFP. The ROC military provides an armed escort to all UNHCR and WFP boats; a dozen Roc military reportedly fought back DRC militia on December 18 south of Impfondo, who attempted to take control of a WFP food barge with motorized canoes in order to steal fuel and food. The ROC has stationed an MI-24 attack helicopter at Impfondo in order to conduct aerial patrols of the river and scare off the militia. (Note: The helicopter appeared to have a European pilot. End note.) The ROC military has also positioned a zodiac at Impfondo and has used the boat to patrol the river, while also placing one military officer at each refugee site to protect the refugees from militia (DCM and Refcoord saw the officers at each site we visited).

¶16. (SBU) The GROC has not granted refugee status officially, but the MFA informed UNHCR on December 18 that it would not oppose UNHCR's use of the term, which will allow UNHCR to make an appeal to donors. The MFA also told UNHCR that it should begin registering refugees, and would "reply soon" on the issue of status. MFA Secretary General Daniel Owassa has told Embassy officers on several occasions that the GROC wants to better understand the situation and what the GDRC is doing about it - in order to understand how long this crisis may last - before it grants refugee status. The GROC Minister of Social Affairs Emilienne Raoul has chaired a crisis committee that includes UN, NGO, and diplomatic representatives. The GROC also contributed 15,000 liters of fuel to the WFP barge that arrived in Impfondo on December 19 with 300 tons of food. UNHCR reported that the Prefect in Impfondo as well as the sub-prefect in Betou have been helpful and cooperative with every request, including the provision of land for the much-needed refugee camp in Betou.

Comment

-----

¶17. (U) The in-country UNHCR and WFP staff and their local partners have done champion's work to provide the assistance that they have to date with very limited resources. UNHCR was able to quickly mobilize resources because it still had limited staff, logistical resources, and local partners in place following the last refugee influx from the DRC in 2002. The current refugee influx does not appear to have reached an emergency stage; however, the refugees' coping strategies are being rapidly taxed as are the resources of the local population. Given the logistical challenges inherent in providing food, non-food items (NFIs), healthcare, water, and other services, assistance will need to be placed in the pipeline quickly so that this does not develop into an emergency. While UNHCR plans to fly all NFIs into Impfondo, WFP

BRAZZAVILL 00000362 005.2 OF 005

will likely need to send food by truck overland from Douala,

Cameroon via Bangui, CAR to Betou, ROC.

118. (SBU) UNHCR staff has identified reconciliation as key to allowing refugees to return home. They compared the events on the DRC-side of the border to a Rwanda-like situation where people who had been good neighbors for 20 years suddenly took up arms against their neighbors from minority ethnic groups. It will greatly enhance the chance of a durable solution when the time comes for refugee return if the process of reconciliation and conflict resolution is a key element of the assistance provided to the refugees beginning earlier rather than later.  
EASTHAM